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SUBJECT: Vietnam: Contrasting Support for Religious Freedom in Two Northern Provinces

HANOI 00001751 001.4 OF 003

¶11. (SBU) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: The issue of religious freedom featured prominently during the Ambassador's visit to the two northern provinces of Yen Bai and Phu Tho on June 25 and 26. The visit was a study in the contrasting treatment by provincial authorities of religious communities in these two poor, primarily rural northern provinces. Officials in the remote Yen Bai had their lines down pat, saying that believers worship freely and may register themselves in line with central government policies, though the unwillingness of Protestant groups to meet with the Ambassador and the fact that no Protestant groups have attempted to register themselves there belie such assurances. Furthermore, local officials in Yen Bai appear to have done little to encourage Protestant groups to register. The relatively more sophisticated and marginally wealthier province of Phu Tho appeared to have closer and more cooperative relations with religious groups, notably its large Catholic community. Phu Tho officials outlined a clear set of activities in support of the government's policies and said registration of Protestant groups will happen if groups come forward. Catholic Church officials there report good relations with local authorities. Any registrations of Protestants in Yen Bai and Phu Tho in the near future will be worth noting as bellwethers of improvements in Vietnam's implementation of its new framework on religion. End Summary and Comment.

Amb to Yen Bai: When Will You Register Protestants?

¶12. (SBU) Yen Bai, one of Vietnam's poorest provinces, stands as a gateway to the Northwest Highlands of Vietnam about 180 km northwest of Hanoi. While many roads through its mountainous and hilly terrain are paved, and much of the province has access to electricity, some of its more remote districts remain cut off from the electricity grid and are accessible only by horseback. The province has over 30 ethnic groups, with slightly more than 50 percent of its population Kinh Vietnamese. It has some 43,000 Catholics and 429 Protestants. All of the latter are members of the H'Mong ethnic group and are adherents of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North. The Ambassador met with Provincial People's Committee Chairman Hoang Xuan Loc, and later with Christian NGO World Vision International, on the issue of religious freedom.

¶13. (SBU) In his meeting with Loc, the Ambassador pointed out that the growth of Christianity is greatest among Vietnam's ethnic minorities, significant since Yen Bai has a very large ethnic population. The Ambassador said he was sorry to hear that no Protestant groups in Yen Bai have registered in accordance with the new religious framework and the Prime Minister's Instruction on Protestantism. Not a single Protestant group in northern Vietnam has been allowed to register in the last two years, he noted. The United States would like to be able to lift Vietnam's status as a

Country of Particular Concern for religious freedom violations before President Bush visits in November, but we need to see movement on this issue before this will be possible.

¶14. (SBU) Noting that he appreciates U.S. support for the "principles of mutual respect, sovereignty, non-interference and mutual respect," Loc said the GVN "sees this issue of religious freedom with a slight difference." The Communist Party and the Government "consider religion a highly spiritual need of people," and allow religious people to practice their beliefs in line with the laws of the country. "The State respects rights, and Yen Bai allows people to carry out religion normally," Loc explained.

¶15. (SBU) Yen Bai's Catholics worship in eight parishes and 69 worship facilities, Loc said. Land issues with the Catholic Church have been resolved, and the province does not interfere with issues of ordination and practice. Protestant groups, which practice mostly at home, were originally started by migrants who came to the province. (Note: It was not clear whether Loc was referring to people who are immigrants from other parts of Vietnam or returnees from refugee camps in Hong Kong where they converted to Protestant Christianity. End Note) When asked by the Ambassador why these groups had not yet been registered, Loc said "they have not found conditions good enough. When they find good enough conditions, we will help them." He added that he did not think that Protestants were discriminated against in Yen Bai.

¶16. (SBU) The Ambassador later met with international Christian NGO World Vision International. Director Greg Kearns stated that it has good relations with local authorities, and World Vision expects that the authorities will soon allow group to operate in the more remote and mountainous districts in the province. Kearns added that "an opening" to do some work on technical issues with the Catholic Church had recently become available. (Comment: To the credit of provincial officials, the increased freedom for World Vision is a positive sign. End Comment.)

Phu Tho: "A Model for Vietnam"

HANOI 00001751 002.3 OF 003

¶17. (SBU) Located on plains and foothills, Phu Tho Province lies just 80 kilometers northwest of Hanoi. Its capital, Viet Tri City, is the economic, political and social center of the northwestern sub-highlands region, a fact reflected by the relatively large size of the city and its public buildings. The province claims over 93,000 Catholic believers and, officially at least, no Protestants. As in Yen Bai, the Buddhist population is also large. Religious freedom featured prominently in the Ambassador's lunch meeting with Phu Tho People's Committee Chairman Nguyen Doan Khanh and later in his visit to the No Luc parish church.

¶18. (SBU) Over lunch with Khanh, the Ambassador turned to the subject of religious freedom after the discussion on economic development and requests for American investment - always the first topic provincial officials raise during the Ambassador's trips - had run its course. The Ambassador noted that while progress had been made in Vietnam overall, "things have been slow - and more difficult - in the north and northwest of the country."

¶19. (SBU) Khanh responded that "the Party and the provincial government have considered ethnic and religious freedom as a top priority in Phu Tho's development. Religious people have received special attention." He asserted that while poverty rates in the province have been decreasing by three percent on average per year, the poverty rate for "ethnic and religious people" is falling by five to seven percent per year. Some communes that are 100 percent Catholic, such as Thuy Van on the outskirts of Viet Tri City, have become good examples of economic development and are some of the richest communes in the province. In assisting religious groups, the authorities have first helped them build new facilities to replace those that were destroyed during the war. The province has upgraded or built nearly 80 "facilities." Second, it has accepted the applications for 35 parishioners to attend Catholic seminaries. Some have even been sent abroad, Khanh said. The province

facilitates the practice of religious ceremonies such as high mass, he added. Khanh invited the Ambassador to attend Christmas in Phu Tho, where the holiday is "a big festival." Third, he said the province also provides its support for the nomination of Church officials to higher positions.

¶10. (SBU) On Protestantism, Khanh said Vietnam does not have a tradition of Protestant practice, but "we still disseminate our policy to individual Protestants, which means that we provide the most favorable conditions. Where they have facilities, we allow them to register." At present, Phu Tho has no Protestants. But Protestant proposals to register in Phu Tho, he said, "would be considered and evaluated positively by this government." The Ambassador responded that the policies the Chairman had outlined could be considered a model for all of Vietnam, adding that the Chairman recognizes that religious believers can be good citizens and their activities should be supported. Given the growth of Protestantism in Vietnam, it would not be surprising if Protestant groups come forward soon in Phu Tho, and the Ambassador expressed confidence that Chairman Khanh and his staff would support them in establishing themselves. (Note: According to ECVN sources, there are no Protestants in Phu Tho. End Note.)

¶11. (SBU) Later in the day the Ambassador also visited Father Nguyen Van Dinh at the Catholic Church of the No Luc parish, founded in the 19th century and claiming about 6,000 parishioners. By way of introduction, Dinh noted that Phu Tho has 100,000 of the 200,000 Catholics in the entire diocese of 10 northern provinces. One half of the 14 churches in his parish had been destroyed in the war, he said, but there is a plan to rebuild them, even though he is currently the only priest that could serve them. Dinh travels from church to church on the weekends conducting mass. The provincial government has been helpful in providing new land to the Church and it had approved new allowances for placements in seminaries so that the parish could train more priests. Ten nuns currently live in a nunnery, he said, engaged in service work and living in seclusion. In regard to the Church's services, the Ambassador noted that the United States has funding for groups that want to engage in the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS and to contact the Embassy if Dinh or groups he knows are interested.

¶12. (SBU) The Ambassador inquired whether religious groups in Phu Tho tend to cooperate or share ideas. Groups are united, Dinh said, noting that Phu Tho also has many Buddhists, some Protestants and a very small number of Muslims. "I know a Protestant pastor who is preaching quietly (NFI), but I am not working with him publicly," Dinh said. He concluded the discussion by stating that in Phu Tho, his biggest problem is not the free practice of religion, but protecting the young from "social evils."

Comment

HANOI 00001751 003.4 OF 003

¶13. (SBU) While officials in the relatively more sophisticated province of Phu Tho appeared proactive about the issue of religious freedom, it is significant that no Protestant groups in either Phu Tho or Yen Bai were willing to meet with the Ambassador to discuss their issues, and, more importantly, take advantage of the attention his visit could bring them. Moreover, Protestant groups in both provinces still do not dare worship publicly, meet openly with church officials from other religions, or attempt to register themselves in these two northern provinces. Any registrations of Protestants in Yen Bai and Phu Tho will thus be worth noting over the next year as bellwethers of improvements in Vietnam's efforts to implement its new policies on religious belief. Nonetheless, and perhaps indicative of the near-term prospects in Yen Bai, local officials' less-than-enthusiastic response to the Ambassador's urging on matters of religious freedom is disappointing. At this point, they seem uninterested in the matter of religious freedom because there are so few Protestants in the province. End Comment.

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